

Travel

Nevada County



New doors to alpine outdoors

Swaths of the Sierra opening to adventurers through new trails, huts and (finally) home-sharing. Page 4

Supper club is about more than a meal

The lights are dimmed. You're sharing a cozy table with friendly strangers, and a French-singing jazz trio plays softly in the corner. Exquisitely prepared dishes barrel out of the kitchen, one

DINING

ly prepared dishes barrel out of the kitchen, one

after another: Caramelized onion galette; roasted cauliflower with pomegranate molasses; summer pea soup. You look over and see a bedroom behind an ajar door.

Welcome to the living room of Megan Hart. One weekend a month, Hart drags her couch into the bedroom of her 125-year-old miner's cabin and opens to the public as Polly's Paladar, a magical pop-up supper club off Nevada City's main street that nearly always sells out. She hosts 28 people at a time for four lavish, intimate dinners.

"It's literally in my home," says Hart, who lives with her teenage daughter. "I can't leave my toothbrush out."

The food is prepared by an invite-only cast of all-star chefs, who pull from their favorite menus. "I tell the chefs, 'Do the thing you've always wanted to do but have never been able to,'" Hart says.

When Hart started the supper club in 2012, she had limited business experience and minimal restaurant credentials. She was a dishwasher and ran a cafe in her 20s, but that's about it. She'd never been to a real supper club before. But she loved the idea of people gathering for a shared meal.

The pop-up is named after Hart's grandmother, Polly.

"Food can be this warm, inclusive, loving thing," she says. "It's a human necessity — we need to sit around a table and dine and nourish ourselves. It's more than just our bodies that we're nourishing. It's a bigger, deeper thing."

The dinner does, in fact, have a bigger purpose: A portion of your meal ticket goes to a local charity.

Order the wine flight and glasses of wine will be perfectly paired for each course. And just when you think you can't eat any more, the dessert arrives — 54 ripe strawberries piled atop a crispy meringue with a dollop of rose water cream. It is heaven on a plate. You will devour every last morsel.

The next Polly's Paladar takes place Sept. 22-23 and will feature chef Shane Thomas from San Francisco who's known for his fresh pastas and his work with Feastly. \$70 per person; pollyspaladar.com

—Megan Michelson, travel@sfchronicle.com



Photos by Mason Trinca / Special to The Chronicle



Polly's Paladar is a magical pop-up supper club, run by Megan Hart, off Nevada City's main street and it nearly always sells out.





Photos by Mason Trinca / Special to The Chronicle

Grab a cup and stay for a while

"I don't like snobby baristas," says Steffen Snell, the 35-year-old owner of downtown Nevada City's Foxhound Espresso and Coffee Broaster. "It sucks when you walk into a coffee shop and you immediately know you're not cool enough to ask questions. That's the opposite of what we aim to do here."

Snell could be snobby if he wanted to be: His coffee is that good. He roasts it himself twice a week. His hot pour-over is so fresh, it still smells like soil. Espressos come in small ceramic mugs hand-thrown by a local potter and scripted with charming sayings like, "Get busy living." You won't find a grande-sized coffee here — eight- and 12-ounce servings only.

COFFEE

Snell opened Foxhound in 2015 after a decade managing a now-closed coffee shop in town and learning to roast beans at Alchemy Collective, a

high-minded roaster in Berkeley.

"I've tried other careers — graphic designer, cabinetmaker, machinist. Nothing stuck as much as coffee," Snell says.

Even if you're not a coffee aficionado, you still have options here: Snell makes his own chai tea with raw turmeric and ginger, and he has started concocting cold-pressed syrups from fruit for a refreshing, icy spritzer.

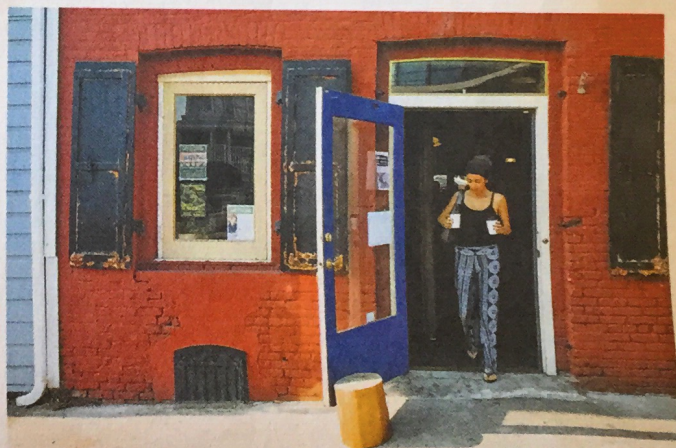
The feel of Foxhound is more intimate than the average coffee shop. Folk songs stream from an old-school record player — Foxhound also sells records.

"We're the only record shop in town," Snell jokes. He moonlights as a DJ for the local radio station. There are only two food items on the menu: a six-minute boiled egg on toast or a grilled cheese sandwich. (He also sells locally made doughnuts.) Cell phones are discouraged. It's the kind of place where you talk to your tablemate or linger over a pot of dark-roasted French press and a good book.

The only trick is finding the place. At Foxhound, there is no sign out front.

"I think that gives it kind of a safe house vibe," Snell explains. It might also, despite Snell's best efforts, be a little snobbish.

— Megan Michelson, travel@sfcronicle.com



Top: Ethan Gicker (center) of Nevada City watches as his 2-year-old son, Soren, gobbles down his doughnut at Foxhound. The coffee shop, above, opened in 2015. Owner Steffen Snell, left, chatting with customer Peter Cobabe (right), envisions the space as a spot for the community to gather.



MOUNTAIN BIKING: THE HOOT TRAIL

Last spring, when trail builders finished constructing Nevada City's new Hoot Trail, a 1.4-mile multiuse path featuring 438 feet of curves and banked turns, mountain bikers flocked to the area, further cementing Nevada County as a destination for the growing sport. The trail-building organization Bicyclists of Nevada County estimates that the trail sees roughly 50 to 100 riders a day, making it the most popular ride in the area.

Located 5 miles from downtown Nevada City off Highway 20, the Hoot is part of an exceptional and growing network of trails that also includes the 3-mile twisting downhill of Scott's Flat Trail, the beginner-friendly rolling Pioneer Trail that parallels the highway, and the more technical Miner's Trail and Taxi Cab, which descend precipitously into town. With more

offerings bringing more grinders to town, no longer is the sport confined to the bike shop.

"Nevada City has long been a mountain bike destination, but recently, a growing mountain bike culture and community have taken it to a whole new level," says Truckee mountain biker Jeremy Benson, author of a new guidebook, "Mountain Bike Tahoe." "Not only is the Hoot Trail ridiculously fun, but it's perfectly situated to link up with other nearby trails to create any length ride you want."

Don't have a bike? You can rent a full-suspension mountain bike — and get maps to the local trails — from the Tour of Nevada City Bicycle Shop in downtown. From \$65 a day; www.tourofnevadacity.com

— Megan Michelson

Cook like a caveman: Connect to the land

By Megan Michelson

It all started when Truk Jantz forgot his frying pan on a camping trip in the Sierra foothills a few years back, and he and his friend were looking at a dinner of raw meat and cold vegetables. Channeling his inner MacGyver, Jantz gathered stones and cobbled together a makeshift stove.

"There are all these variables in the mountains — wind, the type of rock. Nothing is consistent," Jantz says. "But we had no choice. We had to figure something out."

The two crawled into their sleeping bags with full bellies, and Jantz got an idea.

Jantz is no stranger to creative cooking: For six years, he worked as a cook at Nevada City's New Moon Cafe, arguably the nicest restaurant in a town full of nice restaurants, and he has also raised pigs at a nearby farm and run a tasting booth at the local farmers' market. Nevada County has a strong farm-to-table culture, and the back-to-the-land, you-are-what-you-eat ethos runs deep here. Would a class on fashioning a kitchen from sticks and stones appeal to that demographic of crunchy, DIY types? Jantz wondered.

This summer, Jantz, who's 29 with a mountain-man beard, began offering an experience he thinks will resonate: guided backpacking trips centered on eating fresh, locally raised food and understanding food's connection to the land. He calls it Conscious Course.

Nevada County is also a farmers' paradise, with rich soils, a good climate for growing, and ample edible flora and fauna. Jantz's program taps into that scene perfectly.

The two-night courses, some of which include yoga or photography workshops in addition to the food focus, are offered to groups of eight people or fewer, and start with a tour of a local farm to pick produce. Jantz prepares a multicourse dinner right there on the farm, with ingredients collected on site or nearby. One recent menu: short ribs braised in pickle juice, cabbage slaw, beans and tomatoes slathered in a parsley and roasted garlic aioli, with peach pie made from fruit picked off some of the oldest trees in the area.

As dessert is served, he'll tell the story of those ancient trees and the stone fruit pioneers who first arrived to work this land more than 100 years ago. "Food is a way of storytelling," Jantz says. "I want the food to help tell the story of this place, these people."

The next morning, Jantz leads a 5-mile hike into the Sierra, as porters help haul heavy gear. The group will munch on melon and locally made crackers on the trail. "This is a food experience, but it's also a nature immersion

Truk Jantz, founder of Conscious Course, uses Lake Spaulding in Nevada County as a backdrop.



Mason Trinca / Special to The Chronicle

experience," Jantz says. "During the hike, we're stopping to take breaks, hydrate, and also just to be quiet and listen."

Once at camp, Jantz builds a stove out of rocks he collects in the surrounding area, then cooks dinner. A sample menu: smoked potatoes tossed with butter, herbs and salt Jantz harvested himself in Baja, smoked kokanee salmon caught in a nearby lake, and charred zucchini and peppers. For des-

primal. That'll connect you with your foods," Jantz says.

Guests sleep in sleeping bags and tents, with views of the starry night sky. Early the next morning, Jantz prepares pour-over coffee with fresh goat milk and homemade sourdough French toast grilled on rocks and served with berries and spices. That should power the group through the hike out.

Back in civilization, Jantz sends guests on their way with a

take-home box full of produce, local seasoning, coffee beans and locally canned peaches.

"I not only want to show people where their food is coming from," he says, "but I want to leave them with inspiration to be creative and intentional about how they cook."

Upcoming trips include an outdoor skills course Sept. 29-Oct. 1. \$400 per person. For more workshops and dates, visit www.consciouscourse.org

Home sharing finally arrives

Nevada City is full of cutesy bed-and-breakfasts where old-timey innkeepers bring you coffee and scones in the morning, but the town has limited modern lodging options. That's partly because a decades-old ordinance in downtown Nevada City has restricted people from renting out their homes to vacationers through sites like Airbnb and VRBO — until recently.

Last fall, longtime residents concerned about preserving the character of the area put forward a bill to effectively bar home-share companies from operating in town. A group of local property owners pushed back, arguing that rental websites could incentivize local tourism. When put to a vote, the bill was defeated with a 62 percent majority.

But it's still a divisive subject in town: Debates brew at local cafes over whether Airbnb will ruin or save this community, which relies heavily on tourism.

"The scarcity of guest lodging was driving visitors to neighboring cities to spend their dollars," says Kathy Dotson, an Airbnb host and leader of Nevada City Hosts, the local pro-rental organization.



"Allowing short-term lodging has created a new revenue stream for the city, the merchants and the hosts, many of whom, without their short-term rental income, were facing foreclosure."

The end result? You can now find many listings in downtown Nevada City on Airbnb — though some restrictions apply. You can rent rooms or guest houses only at owner-occupied properties, not entire houses, and homeowners are required to pay a transient occupancy tax. Luckily, Nevada City has plenty of quirky guest homes nestled among its pine trees and tumbling creeks.

— Megan Michelson, trued@sfchronicle.com



Kat Alves Photograph

The Glamping Tent

Want to camp in the wilderness but don't want to give up the luxuries of home? Drift Outdoors rents out lavish tents replete with memory-foam queen beds, down comforters, bedside tables, fire pits, fully stocked coolers — even slippers.

Husband and wife Jordan and Lauren Romney, a fly-fishing guide and schoolteacher, respectively, opened the business this spring. "We wanted to give people that experience of being able to sleep or camp in nature, but also get a really good night's sleep," Jordan Romney says.

Tell them where you want to camp and they'll show up ahead of time to erect and style your spacious canvas tent. Set the tent up wherever you'd like — your friend's backyard, a campground, or in a National Forest (it's free!). Pro tip: You can request morning coffee and pastry deliveries. \$225 per night; www.driftoutdoors.org

The Log Cabin

This three-bedroom, three-bathroom log cabin is a five-minute drive from town, situated on 1.5 acres of forested land and with backdoor hiking access to the 4.5-mile-long Cascade Canal Trail. Enjoy new hardwood floors, a modern kitchen, board games, and a telescope for stargazing. You can sleep six and fit the whole family comfortably at a sprawling dining room table. \$200 a night; www.airbnb.com/rooms/16000992

The Artist's Retreat

This two-bedroom 1930s home, within walking distance of downtown and near the kid-friendly Pioneer Park, was completely remodeled this year. Owned by an artist and writer couple (they have a jeweler's studio on the top level), you'll find an antique drafting table, stocked bookshelves, claw-foot bathtubs, and a high-end Viking stove in the kitchen. \$191 per night; www.airbnb.com/rooms/17270150

The Bohemian Getaway

A historic two-bedroom miner's cabin, built in 1880, has been thoughtfully decorated with mid-century styling and family-friendly perks, like a swing set in the fenced backyard. Located within walking distance of town, you can sleep up to five and bring your dog if you'd like. It's owned by a Nevada City native who runs a charming art and home shop downtown. \$220 per night; www.airbnb.com/rooms/4342353

The Downtown Bungalow

A one-bedroom guesthouse suited for one or two people, this cozy, well-appointed spot is a five-minute walk from downtown's wine bars and chocolate shops. The owners live on the property but in a separate home. You can drink your complimentary morning coffee on a small patio out back. \$125 per night; www.airbnb.com/rooms/4016734